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General Education Curriculum Reform for International Accreditation Purposes: Lessons and Implications from an Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This ethnographic study seeks to describe the experience of the general education curriculum reform process for international accreditation purposes and analyze the attitudes and beliefs of general education faculty members. Methods: An ethnographic research design has been chosen because the study describes a process in which a shared cultural group is involved; a group of teachers and administrative belong to one unit (the general education department at one university. Findings: Meeting SACSCOC requirements was not easy-going and required a lot of dedicated work and time. In addition, curriculum mapping was a valuable tool to reveal gaps between the learning outcomes and the assessment methods to measure the outcomes, especially in skill-based courses. Implications: Increasing instructors and staff's awareness of the importance of accreditation in education quality assurance must be a priority for policymakers and senior management within an institution. Accreditation requirements are tough to meet, and so appreciation and financial incentives should be offered to faculty members in exchange.

Introduction

A decade ago, Wieder (2011) wondered, "Does a seal of approval matter?" Having a look at what many universities do to pursue international accreditation, the answer to Wieder's question would be positive. Higher education institutions have considered international accreditation to burnish their image and attract more customers (Ulker and Bakioglu 2019). As a result, seeking international accreditation has become a weapon that many universities struggle to build up an internationally well-recognized reputation, survive in a competitive job market, and assure institution effectiveness (Shen, Wu, and Yang 2019).

In the Arab world, the idea of international accreditation becomes inevitable, as many Arab students seek to continue their studies abroad, either for undergraduate or graduate studies (Alaskar 2018). Therefore, one criterion that attracts students in the Arab world to register in a university or a school is whether it is internationally accredited or not. Moreover, Rawabdeh (2017) argues that pursuing international accreditation assisted the university where he worked in Jordan to shift from the traditional view towards the objectives and the structure of higher education. Finally, he concluded that pursuing an international accreditation is a means towards internationalization and globalization of higher education programs, resulting in "generating more funds from local and international bodies" (p. 56).

As a part of its efforts to improve its standards and image, the administration at one private university in the UAE has decided to seek an international accreditation in the USA called SACSCOC; The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges (COC). Initially founded in Atlanta and Georgia, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges COC claims private and non-profit organizations. James Kirkland announced its establishment in 1895 (Knight 1947). At heart, SACSCOC's mission is to improve education quality and satisfy students' interests and the community's needs. Accreditation can be obtained by meeting specific requirements. One standard of SACSCOC has to do with general education. SACSCOC standard 9.3 reads that the institution requires "the successful completion of a general education component at the undergraduate level" (The principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement 2017, p. 21). Several requirements have to be addressed within this standard. Therefore, the general education curriculum at the university has to undergo a vast reform, including its expected outcomes,

courses offered within its unit, and methods of assessment. Consequently, a task force committee was formed. Its job is to lead the general education reform and meet the SACSCOC standards (9.3) and (8.2).

Since the university is new to applying to international accreditation standards, levels of motivation and engagement varied between administers and faculty members, on the one hand, and among the faculty members themselves. Mismatched perceptions added to the challenging task of general education curriculum reform. Therefore, this descriptive study seeks to reflect on this challenging process of general education curriculum reform for accreditation purposes, highlight the cons and the pros of such a process, and draw on lessons for future implications.

Purpose and Research Questions of the Study

This ethnographic study has the three following objectives: a) to describe the experience of the general education curriculum reform process for international accreditation purposes, b) to analyze the attitudes and beliefs of general education faculty members, and c) to reflect on the process of curriculum reform to pursue an international accreditation. So, the research questions of this study are:

- What are the steps involved in general education curriculum reform to satisfy the requirements of SACSCOC accreditation in relation to general education?
- What are the attitudes and reactions of general education faculty members concerning the curriculum reform process?
- What are some challenges that might arise when a local higher education institution pursues international accreditation?

Literature Review

Since the primary research question of this study is to describe the steps of general education curriculum reform to meet SACSCOC accreditation requirements, studies reviewed in this literature are divided into the following sections; a) SACSCOC and accreditation philosophy, b) general education history and definition.

SACSCOC and Accreditation Philosophy

The philosophy of accreditation, according to SACSCOC, is based on self-regulation to enhance "innovation and accountability" while educating citizens (The principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement 2017, p.4). According to Miller (1998), SACS came in to regulate the education sector in an area where instability was prevalent. SACS is viewed as one of the toughest accreditations as it requires continuity and self-regulation (Stone 2008). SACSCOC has primary requirements. First, the institution should have a mission. Then facilities and recourses should assist in mission accomplishment. Finally, the educational programs, including their objectives and assessment, should be consistent with the institution's mission (Nix Speer 2013). Finally, SACSCOC's philosophy emphasizes the idea of faculty and staff engagement in the process of accreditation. The more organizational members are involved, the more educational quality will be assured (Todd and Baker 1998).

In theory, accreditation organizations such as SACSCOC are viewed to ensure educational quality, bring effective changes into the institution, and ensure its educational quality (Ulker and Bakioglu 2019). Educational quality refers to the "ability of the university (college, department) to offer qualification, programs and learning experiences which are responsive to the broad development needs of learners, thereby also addressing the knowledge, skills and service needs of the country at large" (Rawabdeh, 2017, p. 39). However, in practice, some studies have found that accreditation significance on improving educational quality is low. It is a documented process that requires extra paperwork and meetings and takes too much time and effort (Collins 2015). As Engebretsen et al. (2012) explain, documents required by accreditation certify whatever an institution wants to show, not the presented education quality. In this sense, 'conformity' is assured rather than quality (Engebretsen et al. 2012).

Finally, regardless of whether international accreditations are of great value or not, the process of pursuing an international accreditation is packed with challenges. Scherer et al. (2005) identified five main challenges; institutional culture, human resources, assuring learning, program quality, and financial resources. Cultural impediments could play a critical factor in hindering successful application for accreditation. For example, in the Turkish study by Collins (2015), the hierarchical nature of order at the subject university and the collectivist nature of working relations made the participants uncomfortable with the accreditation requirements. In addition, Turkish teachers have a problem with giving or receiving feedback, as it might be taken personally. Findings from interviews also revealed that "the working practices promoted by accreditation were inappropriate or too culturally different" (Collins, 2015, p. 151).

Second to culture, institutional perceptions and the nature of accreditation standards and criteria could contribute to the successful accreditation implementation (Nguyen et al. 2021). For example, in Viet Nam's different contexts, some higher education institutions, including administrators and faculty members, lack awareness about accreditation's role in quality assurance. Instead, accreditation is viewed as a "fashionable term" (Dao, 2015: p. 752). Similarly, Alaskar (2018) reported varied perceptions about the purpose and value of accreditation between faculty and managers in KSA. Alaskar (2018) concluded that unless key stakeholders understand the profits of pursuing international accreditation, the chances of successful and smooth implementation are low. In light of this, essential questions that this study seeks to explore are; a) if accreditation is successful in one place, should it be successful when applied in a different context? b) Since accreditation requires changes at heart, are these changes only affecting the accreditation process or the mentality of people leading the changes?

General Education History and Definition

Back in 1945, tension prevailed to distinguish between general education and educating people generally until it has become the "furniture in our house, groceries in the neighborhood", describing how general education is" transparent and taken for granted" element" (Ratcliff, 2004, p.4). According to Harvard (1945), general education provides citizens with the education needed to be responsible, while in specialized education, citizens are equipped with specific education needed for a specific occupation. However, one major criticism of Harvard's definition is that it doesn't state the skills or breadth of knowledge accompanied by general education. General education can reflect institution beliefs about what comprehensive education should be taught to all students regardless of their specialization (Word 2012). Therefore, Higgenbottom (1995) later suggested a hybrid of knowledge and skill model to cope with the requirement of the twenty-first skills, such as critical thinking, communication skills, writing, and information technology. A third model by Miller (1998) came as an integration between the first and the second models. According to this model, general education in an institution should cover certain areas of knowledge and skills, emphasizing content-based courses. These areas include arts and humanities, social and behavioral, sciences, math, and natural sciences. Skills, on the other hand, include writing, critical thinking, and information technology skills. Yet, the institution has the freedom to choose which courses to incorporate into its general education curriculum. For example, in the USA, within the high emphasis on completing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) undergraduate degree, lengthy and heated discussions among educators on how challenging "to have general education STEM courses satisfy content requirements and meet general education outcomes" (Stieha, Shadle, and Paterson, 2016, p.1). As Mendez (2006) put it, "general education is not a prescribed curriculum, as traditional survey studies assume" (p. 24). So, what a general education curriculum includes or not could be socially constructed and shared.

Previous research has shown that some higher education institutions usually follow accreditation guidelines for designing general education programs and courses in a few cases (Doh et al. 2018 and Stieha, Shadle, and Paterson 2016). Yet, the list of objectives, outcomes, and assessment methods designed for general education varies according to the selected accreditation and the context (Doh et al. 2018). In addition, within each accreditation, a set of competencies and guidelines are required. The term competence is usually referred to as a capability or a skill. In contrast, according to Moore, Cheng, and Dainty (2002), competency refers to the way knowledge/ skill is acquired or mastered. Moreover, it is broader because it includes attitude, behavior, knowledge, and skills (Salas-Pilco 2013). The earlier framework for identifying competencies in the education context originated in 1996 by the UNESCO's Delors (1996) Report, which focused on four primary areas to function as a solid basis for practical education; learning to know, be, and do and live with others. In the area of general education, Miles and Wilson (2004) identified eight competencies, including communication, computing, and technology competencies. Two years later, the European Community (2006) suggested a framework of eight competencies, emphasizing social, cultural, and civic competencies. In SACS terms, general education is "a component of an undergraduate degree program" in which students are introduced to basics of knowledge in different areas (The principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement, 2017, p.21). The five main areas are; humanities, fine arts, social and historical sciences, natural science, and math. Such courses should be content-based rather than skill-based courses specific to a particular occupation. Therefore, only generic skills such as communication and information literacy should be introduced at the foundation level. They are not specific to any particular job.

The assessment of general education has been traced in the USA back to the 1990s. Since that time till the foundation of several regional accreditations, many methods have been used to assess general education courses and how to use this assessment to get constructive feedback on institution effectiveness (Penn 2011). With the foundation of the regional accreditations in the USA, much emphasis has been placed on assessing general education outcomes, as all the accreditation organizations have listed the assessment of general education as a requirement for accreditation (Vollmer, Gettinger, and Begeny 2014). However, unless competencies or student learning outcomes are identified, the assessment process loses direction and value (Stieha, Shadle, and Paterson 2016). In light of this, several critiques were directed towards assessment practices in general education. Much of the criticism focused on the difficulty of finding ways to assess students' mastery of skills (Penn 2011). Therefore, it is expected from faculty teaching general education to identify what is to be taught "and whether it is intended to contribute to the student's specialized or general education" (Canfield et al. 2015).

In conclusion, undoubtedly, accreditation helps the institution conduct a valuable self-review on its current practices; however, the accreditation process is not as easy as pie. Several factors come into play, and many modifications, if not radical changes, have to be made to meet accreditation requirements. The case with higher education institutions in the UAE is even more complicated due to cultural and other contextual factors. However, upon reviewing previous studies, there is a scarce in the existing literature on curriculum reform for accreditation purposes in the UAE. So, it would be interesting to examine the role of cultural factors in promoting changes and study how such factors can be dealt with. Second, administration, faculty members, and even students are required to adapt their practices and mentalities to satisfy the needs of the accreditation. Hence, this study tries to shed light on the complications raised when a local institution seeks international accreditation and provides other local universities attempting to seek international accreditation with practical implications to achieve their goal.

Materials and Methods

Study area and study duration

The study of general education curriculum reform was conducted at one private university in Dubai during the academic year 2018-2019. The impetus for this university is its desire to apply for international accreditation, the Southern Association for Colleges and

Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges. An essential standard in SACS has to do with revising the general education outcomes and assessment methods. Therefore, the general education department has been involved in a self-study review. Unlike a traditional liberal arts college or university, the general education component of the university is not delivered through a series of courses dispersed across multiple academic departments. Instead, the entire general education curriculum is delivered by one department: the College of Education. Faculty members from all diverse areas, which constitute the general education component, work together, function as a single body, and make decisions accordingly.

Research Design and Sampling

An ethnographic research design has been chosen because the study describes a process involving a shared professional group; a group of teachers and administrative belong to one unit (the general education department at one university) (Cresswell 2007). Moreover, Cresswell (2007) added that an ethnography study is suitable when the researcher contacts the group daily. Therefore, a conveniently purposive sampling method was utilized. It is purposive sampling because the researcher's unit and participants are representative because they meet the targeted characteristics in the researcher's plan (Fraenkel and Wallen 2009). So, 25 faculty members and three administers belonging to the general education department at one university participated in the study. Faculty members aged between 30 and 60 years old and are of different cultural and educational backgrounds. Ten of them are Ph.D. holders, while the remaining are M.A. holders.

Data Collection Tools

To answer the primary research question, a detailed description of the measures taken by the administration and an in-depth analysis of the general curriculum reform process were provided using document analysis and field observation methods. As for investigating key participants' attitudes towards the curriculum reform process and determining what challenges they encountered during implementation, the tool of field observation was used. The researcher had access to observe daily interaction and the behavior of the group (Cresswell 2007 p.2). Finally, a reflective practice based on the researcher's observation and meetings with faculty members was used to suggest implications.

Data Analysis

Narrative data was analyzed through the use of thematic analysis. Walliman (2018) points out that thematic analysis helps the researcher induct the data collected into themes relevant to the topic or the investigated concept. In this study, the thematic analysis process followed the six steps recommended by Richards (2003). First, narrative data was prepared and organized, including the relevant documents and typed field notes from class observations and meetings. Second, the researcher tried to make sense of the data and ask reflective questions to understand better the information collected. The third step is coding, which involves organizing information into “chunks or segments” (Creswell, 2009, p. 173). Done with coding, the researcher then wrote a detailed and rich description of the steps involved in the curriculum reform and participants' attitudes. The description was then organized in relation to the main research questions. The fifth step was the representation of the description. Narration was mainly used to present the finding.

Results and Discussion

Results for RQ1

This section describes the university's path towards carrying out the process of general education curriculum reform. Three significant stages have been identified to accomplish the mission: (1) designing new general education competencies, (2) mapping individual general education course learning outcomes to the new proposed general education competencies, and finally, (3) developing learning outcomes assessment measures.

Stage One: Designing new general education competencies

According to SACS, general education courses are expected to cover five areas; humanities/ fine arts/ social sciences/ natural science/ math. Regarding skills, only skills which apply to students across the various academic programs should be introduced. Therefore, the first task was to revise the old general education learning outcomes and design new ones to meet SACS expectations. Below are the old general outcomes:

PLO 1: Demonstrate an ability to comprehend and connect complex information from multiple disciplines and sources.

PLO 2: Analyze the demography, social geography, sociological perspectives, and historical contexts of issues faced within students' degree domains of knowledge and practice

PLO 3: Apply interdisciplinary approaches to problem-solving and lifelong learning within the domains of specific degree areas of work

PLO 4: Evaluate the skills necessary to respond responsibly and ethically to changing demands as careers, and technological contexts of work evolve

A first strategic move to revise the old outcomes was to use SACS guidelines and UNESCO's (2004) term "literacy". Thus, the word outcome was replaced with the term literacy to describe each area of knowledge. Therefore, the new proposed literacies are:

1. Communication Literacy: Students will be able to synthesize and develop effective written, oral, and visual-graphical works that demonstrate critical thinking and logical organization.
2. Quantitative Literacy: Students will be able to evaluate mathematical and other quantitative information to formulate evidence-based conclusions, to make informed decisions relevant to their major programs.
3. Information Literacy: Students will be able to identify and evaluate information from various print and digital sources effectively and ethically.
4. Scientific Literacy: Students will be able to analyze and interpret scientific and research information, evaluate contemporary issues, and suggest solutions to these issues.
5. Cultural/Historical Literacy: Students will be able to interpret their own and other cultures through language, works of literature and art, philosophy, and cultural and historical studies, leading to better understanding of world cultures.
6. Social/Behavioral Literacy: Students will be able to analyze complexities in human behavior and social systems, evaluate contemporary issues, and make informed decisions.

The construct of each definition was validated by conducting one-to-one meetings with each general education faculty member. Feedback was collected, and several modifications were made based on the suggestions proposed by the general education faculty. As can be noticed, the general education competencies are divided into two distinct groups. The first three are more skills-oriented; they address general skills students will need for successful employment after graduation and throughout their careers. The second set recognizes that, for successful employment, students will need to develop the ability to apply specific types of general knowledge throughout their careers. These competencies focus on primary content and methodology of principal areas of knowledge. In addition, the general education curriculum offers no specialty skills courses. Therefore, students from all of the academic programs can and do share the same classes.

Stage Two: Mapping individual general education course learning outcomes CLOs to the new proposed general education competencies

As recommended by SACS, the second step is that general education courses and their learning outcomes should reflect the broad objectives of general education. Therefore, a comprehensive matrix for the general education curriculum "maps" the course-level student outcomes for each course to the general education competencies. The development and review of this document allow the faculty member to address two vital and related questions: (1) does the general education curriculum as a whole adequately address each of the designated competencies?, and (2) does each course in the general education curriculum adequately address the relevant competencies? Thus, the course mapping framework was used because it serves"an essential navigational tool that visually charts outcomes, courses, instructional activities, and learning assessments in relation to each other" (Cuevas, Matveev, and Miller, 2010, p.11). For example, a sample matrix for the Academic Writing 101 course is presented below (Figure 1). As can be noticed, in addition to mapping the proposed general education competencies to course learning outcomes, it identifies the level at which the competencies are addressed in each course (High, Medium, Low- H, M, L, respectively)

GE Competencies Students will be able to:	1 COM	2 QUA	3 INF	4 SCI	5 C/H	6 S/B
CLO 1:Compose argumentative and persuasive essays supported with substantial evidence and rhetorical strategies	H		H			
CLO 2: Evaluate academic articles and respond through formal critique strategies that will help develop critical thinking skills	H		H	M		
CLO 3: Develop their knowledge of academic essay components and improve the competence to write clear, concise academic essays through writing complex and error-free sentences	H		H			
CLO 4: Apply APA style in in-text citation and referencing and explore their own voice (style) of writing and develop library and research skills	H		H			

Fig 1: ENG 101 Academic Writing Matrix (3CH)

The general education faculty engaged in the process of course mapping. Teachers teaching the same course conducted a meeting and reached a consensus to complete the course matrix.

Stage Three: Assessment of general education competencies

Assessment methods for general education competencies differ across individual courses. Therefore, faculty members teaching the same courses conducted a second meeting to agree on methods and timings for assessing the course learning outcomes. For example, in the case of this academic writing course (See Figure 2), English teachers agreed on the assessment plan, which has to include, as required by SACS, the format of assessment measures and indicates which learning outcomes are being assessed. In addition, rubrics for grading assessments have been designed and included in the academic writing syllabus.

Assessment	Format	Weight	Due by
Quiz	Quiz will cover (CLO 1, 4)	15%	Week 6
Assignment 1	Written assignments (in class) (CLO 1,2, 3,4)	20%	Week 3-4
Assignment 2	Written assignments in class) (CLO 1,2, 3,4)	20%	Week 7-9
Assignment 3	Written assignments in class) (CLO 1,2, 3,4)+ presentation	20%	Week 13
Project	Argumentative essay	30 %	Week 11-14
TOTAL		100%	

Fig 2. Assessment of Academic Writing

Results for the attitudes and reactions of key participants in the curriculum review process
Since the researcher is immersed in daily interaction with the general education faculty and as a participant-observer, two main observations regarding general education faculty members' attitudes were recorded.

First, in the beginning, most faculty members showed readiness for participating in the curriculum reform. However, over time, several complaints have been made. Like any curriculum reform process, it required paperwork and meetings, which caused extra stress for general education teachers. All faculty members had 15 hours to teach per week, and their class size approximately consisted of 30 students minimum.

Second, it has been noticed that some faculty members found it difficult to respond to the idea of reform or change. Part of faculty members needed time to be self-oriented and understand what they needed to do. That was evident among old professors who expressed reluctance to be seriously engaged in the reform and kept posing questions like "why we need to do this? "and "what's the point of this?" On the other hand, Young faculty members readily grasped the rationale behind the reform; however, some of them raised concerns regarding financial incentives since adapting to such change is an overload from their point of view.

Results for the challenges of pursuing an international accreditation
The findings of this study resulted in identifying two kinds of challenges; cultural challenges and challenges in teachers' perceptions. Part of the cultural challenges stems from the fact that in a collective society where conformity and hierarchal routine still hold robust control in the working environment, giving and receiving feedback was an uneasy-going process. Although SACS requires the engagement of faculty members in the curriculum reform and emphasizes the idea that teachers should initiate it, faculty members themselves were not ready to be engaged or probably not used to the idea. Moreover, the new I.E. director has proposed the new competencies, not the task force members. So, even though the I.E. thoroughly explained his rationale, some members, who are all Arabs, had some doubts. Yet, members didn't express these doubts explicitly.

Cultural challenges were also evident when faculty members teaching the same course were asked to meet and agree on mapping their course learning outcomes to the new proposed competencies. Reaching a consensus among the group was like a miracle. Senior teachers expect others just to confirm their suggestions, which was not the case. Most senior teachers are either Arabs or Indians, and in the culture of both nations, seniors are expected to be obeyed. Junior teachers raised complaints about the way they were treated. Some of these complaints were serious, especially when the junior is of western cultural background.
In a few cases, disagreement among general education teachers was due to varied perceptions of how to define competence. For example, general education teachers have different perceptions about what scientific competency means. While natural science teachers viewed it as related to pure natural and environmental science, other teachers related it to the principles of scientific research. The word "scientific" had different interpretations. Quantitative competency also caused a similar disagreement, as it refers to quantity or quantity reasoning using complex mathematical procedures.

Last but not least, a type of challenge involves defining the areas of knowledge, classifying courses according to the relevant area, and identifying the competencies reflecting these areas of knowledge. For example, SACS requires that general education should cover areas such as social sciences and humanities, yet it doesn't define or give examples of what courses belong to each area. Confusion was especially evident in classifying courses such as 'happiness', 'innovation', and 'tolerance'. Those new courses taught under the umbrella of general education were created in response to the recent emphasis by the government of UAE on teaching these values, which make them more culturally oriented. Therefore, using the accreditation standards to classify those local courses was confusing.

Conclusion
The purpose of the present study was to describe the steps involved in general education curriculum reform to meet SACSCOC accreditation requirements, highlighting the challenges and the key participants' attitudes and reactions during the implementation stage. First, meeting SACSCOC requirements was not an easy-going process. It required a lot of dedicated work and time, aligning with previous studies in this area (Shen, Wu, and Yang 2019). An essential step in meeting SACS's requirements is to align between course objectives, modes of instruction, and assessment. In accordance with many studies (e.g., AL-Eyd, Achike, Agarwal 2018,

Giamellaro et al. 2017, and Lam and Tsui 2016), curriculum mapping was a valuable tool to achieve this objective. Like Bayer et al.'s (2019) study, course mapping also revealed gaps between the learning outcomes and the assessment methods to measure the outcomes, especially in skill-based courses. Therefore, the feedback from teachers' meetings and discussions was helpful for better alignment between the two components.

However, while curriculum mapping was mainly beneficial to conduct a self-study review and achieve education quality assurance (Nguyen et al. 2021, Alaskar 2018, and Giamellaro et al. 2017), its implementation was "not as straightforward as it sounds" to be (Ervin et al., 2013, p. 1). As a result, extra effort and time was spent defining and analyzing the competencies' constructs and, more importantly, reaching an agreement while reviewing the course maps and aligning objectives to assessment methods (Stieha, Shadle, and Paterson 2016).

In addition, the accreditation process seemed to cause various emotional and attitudinal reactions; stress, frustration, and in a few cases, withdrawal from the whole process. General education teachers already have larger class sizes, and their teaching load is heavier than their counterparts in the specialized programs (Vollmer, Gettinger, & Begeny 2019). Taking this into consideration and adding to it the meetings and the paperwork to be completed hampered teachers' ability to fulfill their duties (Cheung and Yuen 2017). Moreover, not all instructors perceived the importance of accreditation in education quality assurance which resonates with Nguyen et al. (2021), emphasizing the influencing role of leader communication on increasing faculty members' awareness of the purpose and value of accreditation.

Finally, satisfying the international accreditation requirements also turned out to be thorny work when applied in a different context. Cultural and other contextual factors related to politics at the workplace challenged the whole process (Doh et al. 2018). The collective nature characterized the working relationships and hierarchical order negatively influenced the implementation of the curriculum reform process, which aligns with what Collins (2015) describes as "cultural impediments" to the accreditation project.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study contributed to literature relevant to the general education curriculum reform process for international accreditation purposes, a few limitations should be addressed. First, the study is descriptive and based on one campus. Another limitation is that the researcher is an observer, which might affect the study's objectivity. The researcher might fall into the trap of information self-selection. Therefore future studies could use triangulation of data using different collection tools. Moreover, future studies should be longitudinal, studying the influence of international accreditation on education quality assurance in the long run.

Implications

Establishing appropriate communication channels between faculty and administration plays an influential role in smoothly implementing curriculum reform. Faculty members are the wheels in the process of curriculum reform for accreditation purposes. Steering the wheels in the right direction requires intelligence and practical leadership skills from administrations; otherwise, accreditation doesn't become a means for ensuring quality as it is for improving conformity. Furthermore, accreditation requirements are tough to meet; therefore, to encourage motivation inside faculty and ensure their positive participation, appreciation, and financial incentives should be offered in exchange. If financial incentives are challenging to be affordable for all participants, the administration at least could consider administrative staff participation for the documentation stage.

Finally, reflecting on the whole accreditation experience takes us back to the question with which the study started; "Does a seal of approval matter?" While the apparent answer of many administrators will be definitely "yes", this study has a different direction. Unless a clear rationale for seeking an international accreditation is cleverly communicated to participating faculty and appreciation tokens are offered in exchange, the whole process of accreditation becomes a showcase for the institution's experience in documentation rather than for its effectiveness.

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